

## The Last Drive

By Nicholas R. Solari

Luke took the curve on the mountain road slower than usual. There was a light up ahead on the ground - an isolated red glow in the night. He slowed the truck cautiously, making out the shape of a tall man and a patrol car in the flare-light.

“What’s going on?” Celia shifted in the passenger seat.

“I don’t know,” Luke said. “Hang tight.”

He brought the pickup to a stop behind the state trooper, rolling down his window as the man approached. His footsteps were slow and intentional like a heartbeat, thumping over the hissing of the flares. The man’s face was long like his body, and his slow voice croaked when he spoke.

“You won’t be getting through here tonight, son. A fire started in the valley a couple hours ago.”

“We’re meeting some friends in Bridgeport. Can we go another way?”

The ranger tilted his head to one side. “Wait a minute.” The tall man returned to his car and produced a map. He brought it to Luke and unfolded it part-way on the dashboard, moving his thin fingers carefully across the markings. “You’ll want to head South through the pass and get back on the freeway. Then stay east until you get to Pineridge. From there, if you take the road along the river, you should be in the clear all the way to Bridgeport, if this gets under control.” He nodded in the direction of the fire.

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Luke thanked the man and turned the truck around. He drove South down the road and watched the ranger in his rear view. The silhouetted man kept vigil over the road with his hands on his belt as he disappeared from the mirror.

“I didn’t expect a fire.”

Celia spoke of it as an inconvenience. Her eyes widened slightly.

“A hot summer and no rain makes for a lot of dry grass.” Luke said. “All it takes is a spark.”

“I guess.”

About a half mile down the road, Luke slowed the truck and veered off onto a dirt trail that tacked its way up the mountainside. Celia looked up from her lap. “What are you doing?”

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